

COMMONWEALTH OF AUSTRALIA

SPEECH

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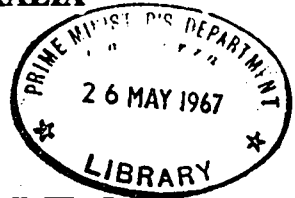
The Rt Hon. HAROLD HOLT, M.P.,

ON

'VOYAGER' INQUIRY

Ministerial Statement

[From the 'Parliamentary Debates', 17 May 1967]



Mr HAROLD HOLT (Higgins—Prime Minister) [8.47]—The House has had a very thorough discussion on this particular matter. Three of my ministerial colleagues have taken part in the debate, as has a former Minister for the Navy from the Government side. It is not my purpose at this stage to go over the ground again or to try to canvass all the points that have already been raised. We have reached a stage where the Parliament must recognise as I am sure most, if not all, honourable members from the outset have recognised, that we have an obligation to do justice—justice to the living and justice to the dead. We also have an obligation to do justice to the Royal Australian Navy. I believe that we have a fine Navy with a splendid record—a Navy that has inherited the British tradition of naval efficiency and gallantry. Certainly our own Navy, though small in size, has maintained a standard which is not surpassed by that of any other Navy in any part of the world. It is a Navy operating in the best tradition established by what we believe to be the best of all navies, the British Navy. Yet, as a result of allegations that have been made and canvassed in the course of this debate, justice is in danger of being obscured and, in the case of some people, denied unless this Parliament can resolve these matters as they should most properly be resolved.

I devote the first portion of what I have to say to what I term a ground clearing operation. Although the allegations that

have been canvassed here have been directed in particular against the commander of the 'Voyager' on the night of this tragic collision, by implication they have reached out to other people; indeed, they have reached out to my predecessor, Sir Robert Menzies, who was then Prime Minister. There was created an atmosphere that the Government, in order to avoid some political embarrassment for itself, concealed evidence which should properly have been placed before the Royal Commission. Some cloud has been cast over even the Royal Commissioner himself, and certainly there have been references to counsel assisting the Royal Commission, the Chiefs of the Naval Staff, the Naval Board, and other senior naval officers. All these things I believe have created a situation which must be cleared. Let me say a few words in relation to my distinguished predecessor.

Mr Clyde Cameron—Do not blame him for it.

Mr HAROLD HOLT—I am not attempting to blame him, and I hope that no one else will blame him. What I want to make clear in relation to Sir Robert Menzies is that from the outset of this unhappy business he was determined that there would be the most searching inquiry into its causes. This was the reason that motivated him in deciding to have a Royal Commission rather than an inquiry by the Naval Board, which would have been in accordance with normal naval practice. To remind the House of what Sir Robert

Menzies said in his ministerial statement concerning the loss of HMAS 'Voyager', I quote his words from page 1074 of Hansard of 15th September 1964 as follows:

I do not seek to minimise the tragic nature of the 'Voyager' collision, with its appalling consequences in lives lost. That is why we instituted the most searching public inquiry in the whole of our defence history.

As one who was close to my predecessor at that time, being the Deputy Leader of his own Party and a senior member of the Cabinet, I can well recall the atmosphere and the spirit in which he addressed himself to these matters. So far as he was concerned, he wanted an inquiry that would produce the truth, not just for the Government to see but for the information of the people of this country. That is the spirit in which I and my colleagues have dealt with every aspect of this matter that has since come before us.

There have been suggestions or allegations that Sir Robert Menzies bore some prejudice against Captain Robertson, but I never heard him utter words of prejudice, or for that matter words of criticism, against Captain Robertson. At the bottom of page 1075 of Hansard of 15th September 1964 Sir Robert Menzies is reported to have said:

Of the general capacity, not only of Captain Robertson but of Captain Stevens, there cannot be any real doubt. Each had a splendid record and very considerable naval experience.

That is not the language of a man who bears prejudice or is trying in some way to do a disservice or to belittle one of our respected Service officers. Something was made of the fact that Captain Robertson had difficulty in securing senior counsel. The facts as I understand them are that at the beginning of the inquiry Captain Robertson did not want counsel; he felt that his own specialist naval knowledge would be of strength to him in whatever might be alleged during the inquiry. But as the proceedings developed and his own position came under challenge, it was suggested to him that he should have counsel. He applied for counsel. At the time it is true that he was first allotted junior counsel, but what has to be borne in mind is that he was not the only officer whose position was under some analysis and examination by the Royal Commission; there were several such officers, and if senior counsel were to be

provided for each of them there would have been something of a practical problem. This matter was raised by the honourable member for La Trobe (Mr Jess). Very properly he formed a view, no doubt after consultation or as a result of what came to him from Captain Robertson. As he will know, he finally brought this matter to me. I in turn took it to my leader, Sir Robert Menzies. I can assure the honourable member and the House that as soon as I made my own recommendation on this matter and explained the reasons for it, Sir Robert Menzies readily consented. It is a distortion of the situation to say, as has been said earlier in this debate, that this was the result of some pressure because there was a Party meeting coming up. It was dealt with on its merits and as it should have been dealt with. Thereafter Captain Robertson had the assistance of senior counsel.

I make a brief reference to Mr Justice Spicer because it has been said that as a former Attorney-General and a Minister in a Menzies Government he was not an appropriate person to have been appointed to this Royal Commission. I do not think any member—from whatever party—who was in this Parliament at the time when Sir John Spicer was a senator and the Attorney-General will have any other view than that he is a man of integrity, whose objectivity and capacity for complete impartiality fitted him to deal with a matter of this sort. I have never heard that seriously contested by any contemporary of his from any section of the Parliament. The fact of the matter is that over the years Sir John Spicer has built up something of a name as an expert in these disaster cases. I took the trouble only today to get some details of a number of these matters in which he has conducted inquiries. I find that he has conducted at least seven investigations—the Trans-Australia Airlines Friendship disaster at Mackay; the Ansett-ANA Viscount disaster at Botany Bay; the Ansett-ANA Viscount crash at Winton; three marine courts of inquiry, including the 'Atlas' inquiry and two in Western Australia so he was not unfamiliar with these naval matters, and the 'Voyager' Royal Commission. Therefore, I do not think the House will allow any argument to rest on the basis that these proceedings suffered on the grounds of lack of competence or

impartiality on the part of the Royal Commissioner.

Counsel assisting the Royal Commissioner has come in for his share of criticism, it being alleged that he deliberately withheld evidence which had a material bearing on the matters before the Commission. The implication is that he did this to cover up in some way for the Navy or to withhold information which could have been of embarrassment to the Navy. The irony of this is that shortly before this he came under a great deal of criticism because it was alleged that his cross-examination and his analysis of Navy actions were much too severe. I do not think the House will place very much reliance upon that charge either. Some of my colleagues—including the present Minister for Education and Science (Senator Gorton) who had been Minister for the Navy until a couple of months before this incident and my colleague the honourable member for Perth (Mr Chaney) who was at the time of the incident Minister for the Navy—have by implication come under a cloud. If one draws from these allegations the belief that in some way the Navy was not in good shape and was not being properly conducted, the inference is that the Ministers I have mentioned, Chiefs of Naval Staff, the Naval Board and senior officers of the Navy, were not doing their duty properly by the nation. This charge all hangs on a single fabric, so far as the Parliament is concerned, and the fabric is the uncorroborated statement of Lieutenant-Commander Cabban. There has not been any other evidence or material of consequence put before the Parliament in the days of this debate which goes beyond the statement that has been under debate and which comes from Lieutenant-Commander Cabban. I ask the House to weigh this because if the reputations of so many men in high places and if the prestige of the Australian Navy are at stake in this debate then the grounds for these charges and these suspicions must be thoroughly examined.

Of course, those who have spoken in the debate have said: 'This is our purpose. This is what we want to achieve. We want to see whether these statements do hang together and whether they are worthy of credence.' I have no wish to make any sort

of personal attack upon Lieutenant-Commander Cabban. I believe him to be a conscientious man with a sense of public duty which he has demonstrated with some courage by the way in which he has brought these matters forward. But as my colleague the Treasurer (Mr McMahon) pointed out earlier today, if we are to rely on this statement and build this structure upon that single statement then we cannot ignore some of the elements in the past record or in the personal history of the man who makes the statement.

Mr Clyde Cameron—So now the Prime Minister will drop the bucket.

Mr HAROLD HOLT—The honourable gentleman is accustomed to that technique. I am putting as dispassionately as I can facts I believe to be relevant. If he thinks that they are not, he can say so or form his judgment upon them, but I think it is of relevance when statements are made—so far not corroborated, although great publicity has been given to the matter throughout Australia, and, I should imagine throughout the English speaking world. So far as I am aware no member on the opposite side of the House has brought forward any substantial corroboration of the series of allegations that has been made. Here is a man who, having as a member of the Naval Air Arm, failed to make the grade and, being removed from that posting, sought twice to resign from the Navy; and who in the course of the first application said that he was disillusioned with the Navy. I think these are relevant facts. I do not wish to over-emphasise them but they are relevant when, I repeat, the basis of the allegations is the statement coming from this man.

These statements bear on the career and reputation of a man who had given long and able service in the navy of this country. He is a man who can no longer speak for himself, because he went down with his ship, and we have a duty to do justice to him as we have a duty to do justice to the living. I mentioned a little earlier Captain Robertson. I think it is relevant again to remind the House of what Captain Robertson had to say about Captain Stevens in the transcript, as recorded, of the Royal Commission on the loss of the 'Voyager'.

Captain Robertson was being questioned by Mr Jenkin, Q.C., as follows:

Did you know Captain Stevens personally?—Yes.

Do you know his record as an officer?—Yes.

Do you know him as a competent commander of a destroyer?—Yes.

And so this vessel which was manoeuvring with you you knew was at least skippered or commanded by a competent captain?—Yes, but let me just qualify that. I knew his reputation as a very successful naval officer. From my own personal knowledge I had not served in a ship with him and so I cannot honestly say that I knew him as a good commander but I knew his reputation was certainly that, and I have no reason to doubt it at all.

Ours is a small Navy and Captain Robertson was, as I understand it, about the age then of what would be the age today of Captain Stevens had Captain Stevens survived. In other words, they were contemporaries in the same fleet—in a small navy. I doubt if he would, on oath, have been expressing himself in these terms if he had reason to believe that there were attributes of Captain Stevens which made him an incompetent officer or which, on the occasion in question, would have raised doubts in his mind as to the course the other vessel was taking.

I want to put to the House—and I do it with some reluctance but with a full sense of responsibility—confidential reports which were made over the ten years leading up to the incident which brought about the death of Captain Stevens. My predecessor gave powerful reasons why these confidential reports should not be made public. He pointed out that the officers who provide these reports are normally not below the rank of captain which, in naval terms, is the equivalent of a full colonel in the Army—in other words a senior officer of the Navy. The reports are made to the superior officer of the officer reporting. If the reports are to be quoted publicly from time to time, then some inhibitions would be placed on the reporting officers and the usefulness of the reports would be eroded. We have thought long about whether these reports should be made public and until the debate of the last two days it had been our decision, although we know of them and their substance, that they would not be made known. I believe that in justice to the memory of this dead naval officer and in

view of the allegations that have been made against him, we have a duty to his family, to his memory and to the public to make known what his fellow officers thought of him at that time. [Extension of time granted] I thank the House and I shall endeavour not to abuse its patience, but the seriousness of this matter is well appreciated.

I asked for reports going back over the ten year period leading up to the 'Voyager' incident. The first report is signed by an acting captain of the Royal Australian Navy. It speaks of Lieutenant-Commander Stevens, as he then was, as a very capable, forthright and reliable officer, really keen, alert and zealous who has the interest of the Service at heart and who does not spare himself to improve conditions. The report continues:

He will do well. Physically fit and plays most games. A good messmate who is maturing with responsibility.

The next report covers the period 1st December 1953 to 27th October 1954 and states:

An extremely proficient and resourceful officer with a flair for organisation. Cheerful and very loyal with the interest of the Service at heart.

A good leader and does not spare himself in the performance of his duties.

Plays most games reasonably well and keeps himself fit.

The next two reports cover very short periods and are marked by the officers concerned: 'Insufficient knowledge' and 'Insufficient knowledge. Time only'.

Mr Clyde Cameron—What dates do they cover?

Mr HAROLD HOLT—They cover the periods 29th October 1954 to 15th April 1955 and 9th June 1955 to 22nd September 1955.

Mr Clyde Cameron—What about the one in between, the one you have missed?

Mr HAROLD HOLT—I have not missed any, and I ask the honourable member for Hindmarsh to restrain his normal impulses and behave himself. This report covers the period from 23rd September 1955 to 26th October 1955 and it reads:

A volatile officer, extremely loyal and capable, who should do very well in the Service. Keeps himself fit.

The next one covers the period from 15th October 1955 to 15th April 1956. It is

signed by a captain of the Navy. It is customary for the next senior officer to whom one of these reports is forwarded to sign the document, or the flimsy, as I think it is called, and to add a remark if he thinks that necessary or desirable. This report reads:

An outstanding officer who lives for the Service. Full of initiative and drive. Quick to make decisions and an officer who welcomes responsibility. Possesses a high professional standard. The ship's present state is due to a great degree to the qualities of her captain. This officer has served under me in another appointment and with my previous and present experience of him I would be glad to have him in higher rank at any future time.

To this the rear-admiral added 'Concur' and his signature. The next one is for the period from 23rd September 1955 to 7th July 1956:

A proficient seaman with plenty of initiative and drive. He has the ability to make decisions without any unnecessary delay. At times wears a doleful expression which is quite misleading. Extremely hardworking but nevertheless can relax. Most pronounced quality is that of loyalty. In view of his non-specialist training and his considerable small ship experience I am not sure regarding the measure of success in staff appointments at this stage of his career.

The rear-admiral who sighted this merely signed it without comment. The next report is for the period from 7th July 1956 to 19th December 1956. He was at that time a training commander and had been promoted commander. The report reads:

A keen and enthusiastic officer who has the ability to bring out the best in the young ratings under training. He sets a high personal example to the officers under him and has good power of command. A good organiser and keen games player. He deserves very great credit for his work as Chief Marshal at the Olympic Games. A most likeable personality.

Then I come to a report covering the period from 14th January 1957 to 11th July 1958:

A very good officer with marked qualities of leadership. He tackles everything with enthusiasm and has the faculty of inspiring loyalty and keenness in his juniors. As well as efficiently fulfilling his duties as Training Commander he has run the F.N.D. Cricket Club and Australian Rules Football Club with success and was in charge of the arrangements for the Inter Service Sports 1957-58 for which the Navy was host Service. These also were a great success. He is a good mixer, a splendid messmate and has considerable personal charm.

The next report is from 28th July 1958 to 15th December 1958. He was then an

executive officer. The report reads:

I feel Stevens is finding it a little difficult being second in command. He is a forceful character with only average brain power, and because of this he is inclined to rush his fencs. At present he makes too much noise too frequently to inspire quiet confidence in a carrier. I have told him of this failing. He is energetic, of sober habits and zealous. When he finds his feet and has a little more experience, I am confident he will be a complete success in his present appointment.

That was signed by a captain and counter-signed by a rear-admiral. Then I have a report from 17th December 1958 to 7th August 1959, when he was still an executive officer:

A smart and enthusiastic officer who gives of his best at all times. He is inclined to brood over problems. A very good games player.

To that the rear-admiral added:

Concur. He has been a successful Commander of the Flagship.

I have another report for the period from 17th December 1958 to 3rd December 1959:

A keen and hardworking officer who has achieved good results. He is a firm and fair disciplinarian both with officers and men. He has been more cheerful and brooded less since his ulcer was successfully treated. Of good physique and smart in appearance. A keen and good games player.

That report was followed by these remarks of the rear-admiral:

Concur. He has been an efficient Commander of the Flagship.

Then there is a report for the period 14th March 1960 to 12th August 1960. The significance of this one is that it covers a period when he was in England as a student at the Royal Naval Staff College at Greenwich. It is signed by a captain of the Royal Navy and there is an additional signature of a British rear-admiral. The report reads:

A cheerful and very likeable officer whom I would welcome on my staff. Stevens has played a full part in all activities of the Staff College and has contributed well. Very co-operative. He should make a sound and reliable staff officer. I believe this officer would be a useful Captain and therefore recommend him for promotion now.

The rear-admiral added: 'Concur'. Captain Stevens was at the Naval Staff at the Admiralty during the period from 27th October 1960 to 7th March 1961, and this report was made on him:

A bluff and cheerful officer who goes into his work with enthusiasm and has very quickly found out how the Admiralty organisation works. He is

conscientious, outspoken and willing to seek advice, and he is pulling his weight well. I am impressed by his commonsense outlook, particularly on Commonwealth matters. He is not ready for promotion yet, but I believe he will be suitable after a little more experience.

That was signed by a captain of the Royal Navy and under 'Remarks of Senior Officer' we find 'Forwarded' and the signature of a vice-admiral, Fifth Sea Lord. Commander Stevens was still with the Admiralty between 27th October 1960 and 18th September 1961, and for that period the following report on him was made:

The more I see of this officer the more I am impressed by him, and the more I like him. He is bluff and cheerful, but by no means a blowhard. He gets on well with everyone and earns their respect for his professional knowledge and vigour. His commonsense is refreshing. Withal he is always prepared to seek and accept advice, and has learned rapidly how best to set about progressing a project in the Admiralty machinery. As an 'integrated' officer he has access to matters he might not see in a purely national capacity, but I have absolute confidence in his discretion and no fear that he will abuse this position. I believe he will do well in a higher rank.

The vice-admiral added 'Concur'. He was still at the Admiralty between 27th October 1960 and 9th March 1962, and I have this report:

I have nothing to add to my remarks on this officer in his last report except to confirm that I recommend him for promotion.

That was signed by a rear-admiral and the vice-admiral added 'Concur'. Then there is a report from the Naval Staff Admiralty, for the period from 10th March 1962 to 7th December 1962:

A vigorous and forceful officer who deserves the goodwill which exists between him and all his contacts. He has dealt very effectively with the multiplicity of business for which he has been responsible. Coming directly from the Staff College, I believe that he has faced a challenging task with determination and efficiency. I do not doubt that he has found it useful experience both in general Staff work and also in the work of a Service Ministry.

That again was signed by a captain of the Royal Navy and to it was added 'Concur' by a rear-admiral. Then there is a report on Captain D. H. Stevens, Commanding Officer, HMAS 'Voyager', for the period 1st February 1963 to 20th July 1963:

A popular and pleasant officer, who has a ready smile and is fine company. He has worked hard and well while with the Far East Fleet to good effect. Very enthusiastic and rarely dis-

heartened. There is sound material here but at present I cannot rate Stevens' chance of reaching flag rank higher than good.

That was signed by a vice-admiral, and another vice-admiral added:

I agree. Stevens has shown himself to be a good Post Captain.

The last report I shall read in this connection covers the period from 2nd January 1963 to 6th January 1964:

A very keen officer of average intelligence who is devoted to the Service. He has a volatile nature, considerable dash and much enthusiasm. He does not strike me as having great abilities and has probably reached his ceiling, though he will always give his best to the Service in any capacity.

That was signed by a rear-admiral and the senior officer, a vice-admiral, added: 'Noted—I concur'. That is the last of the reports up to the time of this episode.

Mr Whitlam—Are they the originals or copies?

Mr HAROLD HOLT—They are copies. If the honourable gentleman believes that I would supply the House with false copies, he might say so.

Mr Whitlam—You put in an anonymous letter once.

Mr ACTING SPEAKER (Mr Lucock)—I ask the Leader of the Opposition to refrain from interjecting.

Mr HAROLD HOLT—I leave the matter to the fairminded judgment of the members of this House. A man has been the subject of confidential reports by senior officers from the rank of captain up to vice-admiral. More than twenty individual reporters are in the list that I have given to the House tonight. If the Leader of the Opposition wishes to study their names I shall make the reports available to him, but for obvious reasons they should not be generally canvassed. This has been the responsible judgment not only of officers of our own Navy but also of officers of the British Navy in Great Britain and outside that country. We are now told on the uncorroborated evidence of one man that we have been dealing with a chronic drunkard, a man who was not fit to command a ship at sea. Is it reasonable for anybody seriously to believe that the charge could be made that any one of these men, let alone all twenty of them, would be so lacking in a sense of duty and so lacking in a sense of responsibility to seamen under the command of

such an officer and going on operational duty with their lives at hazard, that the officers concerned would fail to report some blemish in the character of this man that made him unfit to control a ship or made him a hazard to the lives of the men under his command? That is what we have been asked over recent days to believe about this man.

I ask honourable members to take their minds back twenty-four hours to the allegations that were being bandied about this place. Sir, I think I should put before the House one further piece of information that comes from a highly responsible source. It was prompted by the article that appeared in a Melbourne newspaper on 13th May. I am authorised to make this statement public on the authority of the Minister for the Navy (Mr Chipp), who in turn was authorised by the gentleman concerned to release it. The Medical Director-General of the Navy, Surgeon Rear-Admiral Coplans, has stated:

... in view of certain critical statements appearing in a Melbourne newspaper on 13th May 1967 concerning the late Captain Duncan Stevens, R.A.N., I feel I must place on record my own perception of the man.

I was acquainted with Captain Stevens for about twelve years. I use the term 'acquainted' in the sense that I am acquainted, by virtue of my profession and standing, with many officers and sailors, and their families.

I knew Captain Stevens both professionally and socially. I have stayed with Captain and Mrs Stevens in their own home, and both were visitors to my house. I have never, at any time, seen Captain Stevens under the influence of alcohol. Indeed, he was so meticulous in observing his dietary restrictions that it became somewhat of a joke that when offered a drink he would invariably ask for a glass of milk.

Even before his admission to hospital for treatment of his duodenal ulcer, he drove me many times both in the city and in the country. I refer to this because I do not normally like being driven by other drivers, but I never at any time had any doubts about Captain Stevens' ability to drive, and he was one of the few drivers in whom I felt confident at all times.

I do not believe that Captain Stevens, with his history of dyspepsia and peptic ulceration, would knowingly suffer the pain, and risk the possible complications, of aggravation by over indulgence in alcohol.

Somebody might say: 'That sounds all right, but what about that triple brandy?' There was evidence that, not having ordered anything to drink earlier in the day, on the night of this accident he ordered a triple

brandy. A triple brandy sounds an enormous drink, but I suppose that if the Captain had ordered a tot of rum nobody would have thought it an enormous intake for a sailor. After all, the daily issue in the British Navy of a tot of rum has been going on for more than a century certainly and perhaps back beyond Nelson's time for all I know. A tot of rum consists of between 2.6 and 3 ounces and is the equivalent of a triple brandy. The medical evidence was that the autopsy which was conducted in an area of the body that would produce the least favourable results for this man, showed an alcohol concentration of 0.025%. Much was made earlier in the debate of this result representing a rather considerable degree of alcohol absorption. It has been pointed out that 0.05% is normally regarded as the threshold at which insobriety commences but my understanding is that in Great Britain a man is taken to have reached the threshold of insobriety at 0.08%. In New Zealand, I think, it is taken as being reached at 0.07%. I speak subject to correction on this point.

I do not want to canvass these matters in any technical spirit or in all their detail. They have been discussed by other members who are much more competent to deal with them. All I am trying to do is bring this episode back into something of the perspective that I believe it should rate. I have mentioned these matters in a desire to do justice to this dead man who served his country for so many years, on the evidence before us, with great devotion, loyalty and ability. Nowhere in that record does there appear anything to suggest that his personal habits had disqualified him in any way for the conduct of a naval command. Earlier today the honourable member for Batman (Mr Benson) quoted some other evidence in relation to this man's physical condition. For reasons that we all understand he was not disposed to mention that his ulcer had played up again with him, but there is the evidence about the pain in which he found himself. There is also information to the effect that in times of great pain he would, as I have known other duodenal ulcer sufferers to do, take some spirits and water to ease the pain. However, what is alleged is a far cry from that. Indeed, the very symptoms that were alleged against

him are so inconsistent with a degree of alcoholic indulgence except indulgence such that no man could possibly carry out his normal naval duties, that they become consistent with a physical condition that was seriously affected by this peptic and ulcerated condition about which the Medical Director-General spoke.

I return for a moment to a point raised by the honourable member for Batman in relation to Lieutenant-Commander Cabban. He asked: "Why, if he felt that this man was in this chronically unsatisfactory condition, did he not make a report to a superior officer?" I ask that again, as did the honourable member for Batman, because it would be entirely in accordance with the duties expected of an officer of the Navy, even if it were a superior officer whom he was reporting. It would be entirely in accordance with the duty expected of him to report this condition to another officer of even more superior rank who could take appropriate action. I can tell the House that there is an interesting precedent for this in that one junior officer who did feel it his duty so to notify his superiors subsequently became Chief of the Naval Staff of the Royal Australian Navy. It did no detriment to his position in the Navy and is entirely consistent with what could reasonably have been expected of him.

I do not ask the House to judge these events tonight. I believe that not only is the dead man Stevens in a sense on trial in this Parliament in this debate, together with others to whom I have referred and over whom a cloud has been cast, but also the Parliament itself is on trial as an institution. We are expected by the people of this country to behave with a sense of responsibility and a spirit of fairness in relation to this issue. The Government has not held back any material factor relating to this matter of which I am aware. After my colleague, the honourable member for La Trobe, had, for understandable reasons which we all can respect, pressed this matter so vigorously, it was discussed with him and considered by Cabinet.

We came to the conclusion that we would not be justified in having any further public inquiry into this matter. Now that the House has had all the relevant information before it and has had an opportunity to discuss the matter, it is for the House to judge what course we should adopt. There are various possibilities. A select committee has been suggested, but anybody who has followed the debate closely during the last two days would have grounds for questioning whether this Parliament, in this atmosphere and with so many personally committed in their views on this subject, is the appropriate tribunal to resolve, as between competing evidence, which should prevail. I leave that thought with honourable members. I do not exclude from my own mind a select committee as a possibility. There are other possibilities. I do not exclude any of them. There is the possibility of further judicial inquiry.

There is the possibility that this matter having been canvassed and laid bare as it has, with the question being asked of it whether this evidence would in any way have affected the findings of the Royal Commission, we perhaps should consider whether any useful purpose would be served in further pursuing the matter and whether we would be justified in harrowing the feelings of others indefinitely by carrying these processes on. These are all matters which arise for judgment and I suggest to the House that it should not attempt to exercise its judgment tonight.

I would like to have an opportunity to discuss these matters further with my colleagues and the members of our Parties. I have no doubt that the Leader of the Opposition (Mr Whitlam) would wish to take a similar opportunity to discuss the matters with members of his party. I would expect to be in a position to report to the House at some stage tomorrow the recommendation which the Government would make to it regarding the future course to be taken on this matter. I would hope that that recommendation would be based upon a responsible assessment, invoking that spirit of fair play and decent justice that I am sure all of us would wish to bring to our conclusions on this matter.